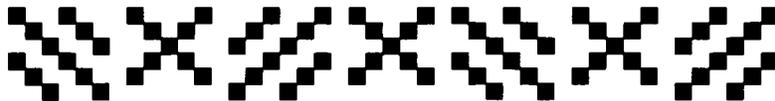


## All Talk and No “Kash”: Valparaiso University and the Ku Klux Klan

*Lance Trusty\**



Scholarly and popular writers alike have steadfastly maintained for half a century that the Ku Klux Klan “ran” Indiana in the 1920s. Textbooks, essays, and monographs spin much the same tale: racist disciples of the Lost Cause resurrected the defunct Klan in Georgia in 1915. The hooded horde spread from the deep South across the heartland of the nation after World War I. Hundreds of thousands of earnest Hoosiers flocked to Indiana Grand Dragon David C. Stephenson’s bedsheet standard between 1921 and 1925, determined to save America from the onslaught of aliens, bolsheviks, Catholics, and blacks. Colossal rallies at county fairgrounds and parks across the state (many resembling the Nazi spectacles of the 1930s) attracted throngs of spectators. Hundreds of white-robed KKK parades in cities, small towns, and villages all but mesmerized the people of Indiana.

The opportunistic Stephenson, the story continues, offered coveted Klan endorsements to pliant political candidates, then proclaimed himself “the law in Indiana.” Thereafter, from his hotel suite in Indianapolis, “the Old Man” directed the Hoosier state’s political affairs according to his own low and splashy tastes. Another sort of affair finally tripped him up: a murder conviction removed Stephenson to the inhospitable confines of a state prison, and the suddenly rudderless Indiana Klan collapsed.

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The importance of these events may, like the famous early report of Mark Twain's "death," be greatly exaggerated. Tantalizing bits and pieces of information suggest that the Indiana Klan was more disunited than monolithic. It was in conflict from the outset with the southern-controlled national Klan. Internal rivalries, corruption, and disorganization were common, despite the Klan's huge, probably sincere, and certainly deluded membership. Quite possibly the Indiana KKK was always the fiefdom of greedy lowbrows, men little concerned with the future of white, Protestant civilization. Did Stephenson and his rival dragon, Walter Bossert, really lose much sleep over those menacing hordes of foreigners, blacks, and Catholics? Two points should be recalled: numbers are not necessarily synonymous with either power or coherent purpose, and, equally important, the entire history of the Indiana Klan as a mass organization encompassed fewer than five years. A detailed reexamination of the Indiana Klan of the 1920s would be illuminating.

Older Hoosiers may recall the Klan's nationally publicized scheme to buy the nearly bankrupt Valparaiso University in 1923 and build a National Klan University on the carcass. A confused tale of "how the Klan bought Valpo" still circulates in northern Indiana. A close look at that unconsummated purchase provides valuable insights into the Klan's leadership and organizational effectiveness. Most Klan records have disappeared, but newspapers, Klan journals, the excellent archives of Valparaiso University, and shards from Stephenson's trial and appeals in the Archives Division of the Indiana Commission on Public Records housed in the Indiana State Library permit a surprisingly close look at a vain foray into the world of higher education by an organization sadly in need of some.

The immediate predecessor of Valparaiso University, the Northern Indiana Normal School and Business Institute, opened in 1873 amid the brick and wooden bones of the former Valparaiso Male and Female College. The energetic Henry Baker Brown, its Ohio-educated founder, and his friend, Oliver Perry Kinsey, who joined him in 1881, guided their remarkable institution for a third of a century. One of the nation's largest private universities by 1915, Valparaiso occupied a useful niche between the Midwest's traditional, elitist private colleges and the distant, degree-oriented state universities.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For detailed studies of the early history of Valparaiso University see John Strietelmeier, *Valparaiso's First Century: A Centennial History of Valparaiso University* (Valparaiso, 1959); and Powell A. Moore, *The Calumet Region: Indiana's Last Frontier* (Indianapolis, 1959; reprint ed., Indianapolis, 1977), 453-71. The school became Valparaiso College in 1900 and Valparaiso University in 1906.

Brown and Kinsey's "Poor Man's Harvard" was unique by any standard. Between 1873 and 1920 these diligent Victorians managed an exceptionally utilitarian school on a shoestring budget and taught over 140,000 "useful" students from elementary level to graduate and professional school. Forty percent of them became teachers, but most of those who attended "Old Valpo" were more interested in acquiring commercial and industrial job skills than in earning a degree. Their open-admission "People's University" was dominated by a philosophy of "work, not wealth." Brown and Kinsey daily practiced most of the educational "innovations" of the present century, including open admissions; coeducation; preparatory, remedial, and work-study programs; education for the handicapped; and, above all, practical industrial-technical training, shorn of theory and degrees.<sup>2</sup>

Local residents correctly called their college "Brown and Kinsey's School," for Valparaiso was a proprietary institution until 1920. The two men owned and operated one of the nation's largest private universities for half a century without trustees, endowment, fraternities and sororities, dances, or even football. The school's Latin motto translated as "Where Theory Squares With Practice," and under that rubric over two hundred faculty members trained and educated some five thousand students around 1910. An admiring Boston editor described "Valpo" as "a place of study and nothing else."<sup>3</sup>

Valparaiso was, in fact, considerably more. The brick buildings on College Hill housed a remarkable community convinced that "learned men theorize; educated men practice." Brown and Kinsey's high school and preparatory school divisions educated thousands annually. Among them were many older students and a generous sprinkling of immigrants. On the eve of World War I a thousand future teachers were registered in the normal school. Another thousand students plumbed the secrets of science, engineering, and commerce. A thousand more studied medicine and dentistry on Valparaiso's Chicago campuses. Still others were enrolled in the schools of music, pharmacy, and law. The faculty

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<sup>2</sup> Valparaiso *Daily Vidette*, August 8, 1923; "Valparaiso and the World," tear sheet, 1920 File (Valparaiso University Archives, Moellering Library); Horace W. Evans to Governor Ed Jackson, February 14, 1925 (Valparaiso University Archives). The documents used in this paper are stored in the Valparaiso University Archives in annual files.

<sup>3</sup> Moore, *Calumet Region*, 460-61; Boston *Herald*, n.d., cited in "The Klan 'Backs' a College," *Literary Digest*, LXXVIII (September 15, 1923), 42; Valparaiso *Vidette-Messenger*, August 16, 1936; "Valparaiso and the World"; James W. Albers, *From Centennial to Golden Anniversary: The History of Valparaiso University from 1959-1975* (Valparaiso, 1976), 4.



Courtesy Valparaiso University Archives.

**HENRY BAKER BROWN**  
(1847-1917)

Brown founded Valparaiso University in 1873 as the Northern Indiana Normal School on the campus of the defunct Valparaiso Male and Female College. A Mt. Vernon, Ohio, farm lad who had taught in a rural school at the age of fifteen, Brown attended Ohio Wesleyan and graduated from a normal school in 1871. He presided over one of the nation's largest, most democratic, and most successful universities for forty-four years. Brown died without fully transferring his school to a board of trustees and so precipitated Valparaiso's years of crisis. This picture was taken in Boston in 1913.



Courtesy Valparaiso University Archives.

**OLIVER PERRY KINSEY**  
(1849-1931)

Kinsey, like his friend Henry Baker Brown, was a Buckeye. He began his service to Valparaiso University in 1881 as the school's general business manager, was vice-president from 1880 to 1917, and acting president after Brown suffered a stroke in 1912. His direction of the university's dormitories and food service set high standards of quality and economy and allowed thousands of "ambitious and slim-pocketed" young people to attend Old Valpo. His policies attracted considerable national attention around the turn of the century. Described as a "picturesque character," Kinsey was also a popular lecturer. A public advocate of temperance and women's suffrage over the years, Kinsey served as president after Brown's passing until his wife's declining health forced him to retire to Florida.

emphasized “practical” curricula, rooted in workaday reality, perhaps at the expense of traditional academic education. Moreover, a “democratic” ethic prevailed, at least ideally, permitting faculty and students to escape from the “silly claims of prerogative and superiority” so common in the private colleges of the day.<sup>4</sup>

Brown and Kinsey managed their property carefully. Dormitory and dining hall charges were marvelously low. A careful selection of locally produced foodstuffs helped provide three wholesome meals a day for twenty cents in 1913. Tuition, room, and board cost only \$231.00 in 1919. The student newspaper reported that “roast beef, tender and juicy,” was available in the dining hall for fourteen cents. “A generous cut” of pie was seven cents, olives, two cents, and doughnuts, a penny.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, alumni were little disposed to help their growing, service-oriented, but still proprietorial alma mater, even after 1914, when rising operating costs and a need for buildings hounded Brown and Kinsey. American educators increasingly demanded academic standardization after 1900, and proprietorial universities either changed or disappeared. The North Central Association of Colleges and Universities denied accreditation to Valparaiso, which retarded public acceptance of the college’s programs and prevented transfer of its academic credits. A 1919 state requirement that private colleges and universities maintain a half-million-dollar endowment seemed insurmountable. An otherwise laudable rise in public day and night school attendance eroded Valparaiso’s once-profitable Preparatory Department, and the normal program increasingly competed with growing, fully accredited, and even more economical state colleges and universities.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A printed letterhead used in the university’s 1924 fund-raising campaign proclaimed that Valparaiso was a place where “LEARNED MEN THEORIZE; EDUCATED MEN PRACTICE,” 1924 File (Valparaiso University Archives); Albers, *Centennial*, 4; Thomas H. Cannon, H. H. Loring, and Charles J. Robb, eds., *History of the Lake and Calumet Region of Indiana, Embracing the Counties of Lake, Porter and LaPorte . . .* (2 vols., Indianapolis, 1927), I, 545.

<sup>5</sup> John Willy, “Catering Extraordinary,” *The Hotel Monthly*, XX (November, 1913), 77, cited in Moore, *Calumet Region*, 462; *Bulletin of Valparaiso University*, LI (July, 1919), 4-5; for comparison, student fees at Butler College in 1919 were \$386.00. *Butler College Bulletin* (Indianapolis, 1919), 19.

<sup>6</sup> Albers, *Centennial*, 5; Horace M. Evans to Mrs. Auten, Little Rock, Arkansas, October 23, 1923 (Valparaiso University Archives); Moore, *Calumet Region*, 465-67; Catharine Corboy [university secretary], “A Brief Statement in Regard to Valparaiso University,” typescript, 1921 File (Valparaiso University Archives); “H.K. Brown, before the Valparaiso Alumni Association of Chicago, November Twentieth, 1920,” (Valparaiso University Archives); *Year Book of the State of Indiana for the Year 1920* (Indianapolis, 1921), 607.



Courtesy Valparaiso University Archives.

VALPARAISO UNIVERSITY'S "OLD COLLEGE BUILDING," WITH ITS MISMATCHED TOWERS, HANDSOME TREES, OVAL DRIVE, AND STUDENTS LOUNGING ON THE GRASS, SEEMS AN ARCHETYPICAL "OLD MAIN" AT HUNDREDS OF NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES.

World War I intensified Valparaiso's problems, despite a federally funded training program that brought some eight thousand soldiers to the campus. Many immigrant students withdrew from the college and returned to their war-torn European homelands between 1914 and 1917. Seventeen hundred native-born American students at Valparaiso, constituting perhaps the largest percentage contributed by any college in the nation, went to war in 1917 and 1918 after the United States joined the fray. Young women bypassed Valparaiso in favor of readily available, lucrative positions in war-related industries, thus shrinking the student body even further.<sup>7</sup>

The battered school underwent its first administrative crisis at the same time. The revered President Henry Baker Brown, already incapacitated by a stroke, died in 1917 without carrying out his plan to place the university in the hands of a board of trustees. Kinsey served as president for two years, then deeded his interest in the school to the Brown family, and retired to Florida with his ailing wife. And, according to a university historian, two major dormitory fires "added to the sense of uncertainty."<sup>8</sup>

The struggling university's next president was Henry Kinsey Brown, son of the founder. A California broker and businessman, Brown had been summoned to Valparaiso in 1917 to serve as bursar. The summons came from his mother, Neva Brown, who considered the university an endangered family "estate." The business of creating a board of trustees seemed minor to the ambitious "HK," who decided simultaneously to raise large sums of money, build an endowment, and reconstruct the entire university, decrepit campus, outmoded programs, and all.<sup>9</sup>

Young Brown, in a hurry, soon astounded members of the old order, who concluded that he "no doubt meant well" but lacked experience and "mature judgement." In two years, "with a youth's enthusiasm," HK transformed Valparaiso into a "modern" university for "the better educated, more sophisticated young men and women who were later to find their prophet and apologist in Mr. F. Scott Fitzgerald." President Brown banished Val-

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<sup>7</sup> Albers, *Centennial*, 5; Moore, *Calumet Region*, 466; "H.K. Brown before the Valparaiso Alumni"; Corboy to William R. Evans, Casper, Wyoming, April 2, 1921 (Valparaiso University Archives); Valparaiso *Vidette-Messenger*, August 3, 1923; South Bend *Tribune*, February 2, 1924.

<sup>8</sup> "H.K. Brown before the Valparaiso Alumni"; Chapter IV, "A Time of Troubles, 1919-25," in Strietelmeier, *Centennial History*, 62-76, reconstructs the events of this period; Albers, *Centennial*, 5; Moore, *Calumet Region*, 466-67.

<sup>9</sup> William C. Dickmeyer, "History of Valparaiso University," undated typescript, 7-8 (Valparaiso University Archives); Moore, *Calumet Region*, 466-67.

po's hallowed technical and remedial courses from his newly—and expensively—refurbished classrooms and replaced them with academic classes. Fraternities and sororities blossomed, and dances replaced Valparaiso's fustian Saturday night debates. Wealthy families with college-age children were bombarded with catalogs and appeals from the Midwest's new Harvard-to-be.<sup>10</sup>

Brown chose the traditional route to quick recognition for his "New Valpo," and new varsity teams with ambitious schedules quickly overshadowed well-established intramural athletics. HK challenged Princeton, Harvard, and other well-known athletic and academic powers, hoping to fill Valparaiso's new gymnasium with enthusiastic, endowment-minded alumni. Intercollegiate basketball was first played on a modest scale at Valpo in 1916, and a full season followed a year later. Varsity football began in 1920 under Athletic Director George Keogan. With the help of a brace of burly Gary steelworkers, Keogan played the rich man's Valparaiso at Cambridge, Massachusetts. Harvard won, 21-0, despite the ringers; but Valparaiso had played on the national athletic stage, and the entire campus admired the team's new "V" sweaters.<sup>11</sup>

Brown's medicine was necessary, but costly. Valparaiso's new "rah rah" atmosphere, the emphasis on college curricula, and steep increases in tuition, room, and board drove most of the school's traditional clientele away, but even in an age of booming higher education, the "new" Valparaiso failed to attract large numbers of undergraduates. Growing fiscal and academic problems divided once-peaceful students into noisy pro- and anti-Brown factions. Morale sagged as operating funds grew scarce. Unpaid faculty members left; maintenance slipped, then ceased; and College Hill assumed a general air of decay. Ill-suited to his impossible task, President Brown finally appointed a board of trustees and resigned in July, 1920.<sup>12</sup>

The new trustees of the reorganized university were civic-minded local and Chicago business and professional men. All were keenly aware of the economic importance of the university to the Valparaiso community. Among them were Charles L. Jef-

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<sup>10</sup> Streitmeier, *Centennial History*, 63-64; Corboy to William R. Evans, April 2, 1921 (Valparaiso University Archives); H.M. Evans to Mrs. Auten, October 23, 1923, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *The Valumni*, I (Summer, 1920), 45; Streitmeier, *Centennial History*, 64, 68-69.

<sup>12</sup> Kate C. [Catharine Corboy] to R. G. Railey, Forkton, Kentucky, March 3, 1921 (Valparaiso University Archives); Streitmeier, *Centennial History*, 64-65; W. C. Sutter, secretary-manager, Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce, to Mr. Representative, March 4, 1925 (Valparaiso University Archives).



Courtesy Valparaiso University Archives.

### DANIEL RUSSEL HODGDON

Hodgdon was president of Valparaiso University from July, 1920, to April, 1921. He arrived with a genuine bachelor's degree from Bates College and a string of phony graduate degrees. Reputedly the author of two science texts, he had little understanding of the school's traditions and problems. He inherited an empty treasury and a simmering feud with the alumni. Hodgdon's "degrees," problems, and high-handed administration caused his early dismissal. Before leaving, Hodgdon publicly described staid "Old Valpo" as a hotbed of "bolshevist rowdies" and accused the faculty of fostering "sinister inside influences." The press, well-conditioned by the "Red Scare," made far too much of Hodgdon's sour grapes, and as he departed, alumni purses closed.

frey, president of the Farmers' State Bank; Maurice R. Lowenstein, manager of the city's leading department store; jeweler George L. Beach; and physician Gerald H. Stoner. The board was enlarged to twenty-one in 1923, and local men were joined by members from New York, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere. During the struggle to save the university between 1920 and 1925, most important decisions were made by a nine-member executive board, chaired by the university president and vice-president.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, the board's first years were dominated by a parade of presidents. H.K. Brown's immediate successor was Daniel R. Hodgdon, an ill-tempered autocrat with a genuine bachelor's degree from Bates College buried under a collection of phony diplomas (M.A., M.S., Sc.D., LL.D., Ph.D.). Ignoring Valparaiso's rapidly declining enrollment, President Hodgdon continued Brown's modernization, but the school could not afford small classes, expensive institutional advertising, and traveling varsity teams. "Mr. Hodgdon distinguished himself," said a successor, "by showing the most complete and amazing ignorance of schools in general and of Valparaiso University in particular." His "reign of incompetence," particularly after the failure of his booster-style fund-raising campaign, started a war among faculty, students, and trustees that ended with his resignation. How much of this was chargeable to existing and probably unavoidable tensions among old and new faculty, town and gown, boosters and knockers, and increasingly desperate trustees is anyone's guess half a century later.<sup>14</sup>

Before leaving, the sour Hodgdon publicly described the staid old school as a "hotbed of bolshevism, communism, and other cults." His silly charges were given credibility by the Red Scare of the day and were duly echoed in the national press. Campus commotions between boosters and knockers or insurgents and loyalists, depending on who told the tale, filled the city jail with three students and newspapers with even more lurid headlines. Hodgdon's sensational nonsense further alienated the alumni and brought collapse nearer. John E. Roessler and Milo J. Bowman, Jr., two avowedly temporary presidents, offered conservative re-

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<sup>13</sup> Valparaiso *Evening Messenger*, July 24, 1920, October 15, 1923; Valparaiso University Board of Trustees, "Minutes," 1921 File (Valparaiso University Archives).

<sup>14</sup> Daniel R. Hodgdon's personal history and his dubious achievements were reviewed in the Valparaiso *Evening Messenger*, July 24, 1920, April 26, 1921; Valparaiso *Daily Vidette*, July 10, August 16, 1924; Streitmeier, *Centennial History*, 70; Moore, *Calumet Region*, 467-68; quotation is from H.M. Evans to Mrs. Auten, October 23, 1923 (Valparaiso University Archives).



Courtesy Valparaiso University Archives.

### MILO JESSE BOWMAN, JR.

A long-term Valparaiso patriot, Bowman was dean of the law school, 1907-1928. A Hoosier and holder of two degrees from Hanover College, Bowman guided Valparaiso's fortunes as president from May, 1922, to January, 1923, during the "parade of presidents." He was vice-president from 1922 to 1925 and apparently worked diligently to secure the sale of the school to all comers, including the Ku Klux Klan. Bowman left Valparaiso in 1928 to teach law at Indiana University, retired, and returned to teach at Valparaiso once again in his remaining years.

gimes between April, 1921, and the end of 1922, but student enrollment continued to fall. Twelve hundred students appeared for the fall, 1922, term, fewer than a thousand in 1923, and between six and eight hundred a year later. It was small wonder that the school was in trouble: in four years two presidents had tried to push Valparaiso into the mainstream of higher education, and two others had resurrected the "Poor Man's Harvard."<sup>15</sup>

Remarkably little was accomplished by the four presidents. A federally sponsored veterans vocational training program on campus ended in 1922. Valparaiso's normal school and still unaccredited college program barely limped along. The high school survived as "one of the few places today where mature persons can get this education without embarrassment," and the Preparatory Department continued to help "foreigners." Useful as these programs were, most were hardly university matters, and the rudderless school gradually sank in a sea of overdue bills.<sup>16</sup>

Despite these financial and administrative crises, daily campus life seemed normal enough. Undergraduates taught English and civics to eight hundred adults, mostly recent immigrants, at the Gary YMCA in 1921. The Rehabilitation Club presented a successful minstrel show, featuring an olio of the palace of King Herod, in the same season. Eighteen hundred students registered for classes in 1922, mostly in the high school. Athletic Director William Shadoan, former assistant coach of Centre College of Kentucky's famed "Prayin' Colonels" basketball team, led Valpo through a twenty-eight game season in 1923. Playing without substitutes, the "Victory Five" won twenty-four games and national acclaim. The school's annual catalogs glossed over the academic and physical decay afflicting the campus, and to the uninformed Valparaiso seemed a normal, busy university.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Hodgdon's comment can be found in the *Gary Post-Tribune*, April 10, 1921; the *Valparaiso Daily Vidette*, August 16, 1923, ruefully described "Dr." Hodgdon's presidency as "only too well known"; *Valparaiso Evening Messenger*, September 19, 1923; Moore, *Calumet Region*, 468-69; Streitmeier, *Centennial History*, 70; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 10, 26, 1921; Valparaiso's only prominent "Red" was Mikhail Borodin, who had attended the university on a part-time basis in 1908-1909. See Dan N. Jacobs, *Borodin: Stalin's Man in China* (Cambridge, 1981), 24-26; Moore, *Calumet Region*, 469.

<sup>16</sup> "H.K. Brown before the Valparaiso Alumni"; *Seven Questions About Valparaiso University* (Valparaiso, 1924), unpaginated brochure (Valparaiso University Archives); Moore, *Calumet Region*, 469; *Valparaiso Evening Messenger*, April 26, 1921; *Valparaiso University*, a printed, unpaginated appeal to alumni and others issued in mid-1921 (Valparaiso University Archives).

<sup>17</sup> Streitmeier, *Centennial History*, 75; *Valparaiso Evening Messenger*, April 26, 1921; *Gary Post-Tribune*, August 5, 1921; *Valparaiso University General Catalogue* (1922-1923), *passim*.



Courtesy Valparaiso University Archives.

### HORACE MARTIN EVANS

Evans faced every academic and fiscal problem imaginable between January, 1923, and January, 1926, during his presidency of Valparaiso University. Born in Harrison County, Indiana, in 1860, Evans graduated from Valparaiso in 1886 and taught there for ten years while earning an M.D. degree from Northwestern. He presided over Chattanooga Normal University from 1896 to 1900, then returned to Valparaiso. He returned to Tennessee to operate a lumberyard in 1912 and joined the United States Public Health Service during World War I. Evans returned again to Valparaiso in 1923, determined to save it at all costs, and perhaps went too far. He offered his penniless and unaccredited school to several organizations, including the Ku Klux Klan, and finally tendered it to a Lutheran group.

Horace Martin Evans became Valparaiso's indispensable man in 1923. A native of Harrison County, Indiana, and a former Valparaiso student and professor, President Evans was also a physician (Northwestern, '92) and a businessman. A single-minded university patriot, Evans was willing to shake hands with the devil for his desperate school, and he very nearly did. During his brief presidency Evans fought bankers, realtors, judges, and a medical equipment factory; wooed governors, legislatures, and the Ku Klux Klan; and finally placed his school in the responsible hands of a Lutheran organization.<sup>18</sup>

President Evans's most immediate problem was Valparaiso's unmanageable debt. His trustees operated the university, but the Brown family retained ownership of the campus as security for a total debt of around \$375,000. H.K. Brown had personally borrowed \$115,000 on behalf of the university and, not unreasonably, sought compensation. He also asked for \$150,000 for the Brown family in exchange for its interest in the College Hill campus, an annuity for his ill, sixty-five-year-old mother, and an unnamed sum for retired president Oliver Kinsey. The school's formal creditor was the Brown family-owned Valparaiso Realty Company, which had raised the money loaned to the university by selling 125,000 shares of ten-year preferred stock to J.F. Wild and Company, an Indianapolis investment bank. The campus was pledged as collateral. University officials probably blamed too many of their troubles on the Brown family (and perhaps more on Neva than HK) after 1920. In fact, academic, modernization, and "image" problems were far more important.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Neil Betten [and James B. Lane], "Nativism and the Klan in Town and City: Valparaiso and Gary, Indiana," *Studies in History and Society*, IV (Spring, 1973), 9; Evans's career is summarized in a clipping from the *Valparaiso Evening Messenger* [April, 1922], 1922 File (Valparaiso University Archives); Dr. Evans reportedly presided over a "group of local influential citizens" determined to "save" the university even before he was asked to serve as president. Interview with John W. Van Ness, June 15, 1984, typescript, Oral History Project (Valparaiso University Archives). Van Ness (1894- ) is a native of Valparaiso, a graduate of its university, a retired local businessman, and a former Indiana legislator. *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> "H.K. Brown before the Valparaiso Alumni"; *Seven Questions About Valparaiso University*; Corboy estimated the debt in 1921 at \$383,000. "Brief Statement," 1921 File (Valparaiso University Archives); Evans's 1923 figure was \$350,000. Evans to Mrs. Auten, October 23, 1923 (Valparaiso University Archives); the university admitted to a debt of \$375,000 in October, 1924. *Seven Questions About Valparaiso University*; Streitmeier, *Centennial History*, 36, 74; *South Bend Tribune*, August 26, 1923; *Valparaiso Evening Messenger*, July 25, 26, 1923; also see the copy of the lease between Valparaiso Realty Company and the trustees of Valparaiso University, July 10, 1920, in the Valparaiso University Archives.

The Valparaiso trustees had agreed with Brown's realty company in 1920 to redeem the stock and accrued interest by 1930, and if all went well, they would truly own the university in ten years. Fixed overhead and declining enrollment, however, forced them into a desperate search for a rescuer. An earlier attempt to transfer the school to the state had failed in 1919, and that route seemed barred. A fund-raising drive in 1920-1921 brought surprisingly little cash from Valparaiso's tens of thousands of alumni. Attempts to woo local citizens, a Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce campaign to induce local firms to buy the school, and a university bond sale all failed miserably. The trustees did manage to negotiate a "loan," probably in the form of a debt moratorium, from the J.F. Wild Bank to carry them through 1922. A year later an arsonist levelled the Old College Building. That disaster brought fifteen thousand dollars in insurance money, and a five thousand dollar public subscription arrived at a critical moment.<sup>20</sup>

Despite these small "windfalls," President Evans's cupboard was bare by mid-1923. Most local observers expected the old school, which had over the years generated between a quarter and a third of the community's trade, to close momentarily. Valparaiso was running out of cash, faculty, and students and was overdue on a scheduled payment to Valparaiso Realty. Only desperate measures could keep the doors of the practically bankrupt school open.<sup>21</sup>

Two surprising suitors for Valparaiso University appeared in mid-1923; both would sorely test the determination of the school's stubborn president. The first to arrive was, improbably, the Realm of Indiana of the Invisible Empire of the Ku Klux Klan. The hooded organization's Domain of Lake Michigan had scheduled a grand rally for May at the Porter County Fairgrounds just north of the city. Prior to the event, the publicity-minded editor of *The Dawn*, the Chicago-based newspaper of the Invisible Empire's Realm of Illinois, contacted the Valparaiso Klavern, seeking information about the city. The chairman of the Klavern's Publicity Committee, a Valparaiso University student whose name is lost to history, responded with enthusiasm

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<sup>20</sup> Valparaiso *Daily Vidette*, February 8, 1920, July 10, 1924; Streitlmeier, *Centennial History*, 73; Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce, *Valparaiso*, I (October, 1921), 3-4; Oliver P. Kinsey to Mr. Barber, April 23, 1923 (Valparaiso University Archives).

<sup>21</sup> Unfounded rumors that local individuals or businesses might save the school (and with it the city's economy) were frequent during 1923. Valparaiso University *Torch*, July 18, 1923; Valparaiso *Daily Vidette*, August 16, 1923.

and "conceived the idea of linking the two institutions together . . ." Would the Klan care to examine the city's prestigious, but desperate, university with an eye toward acquiring a major "educational center" at little cost?<sup>22</sup>

The editor of *The Dawn* launched the vaporous Klan-university episode in his puff pieces about the town. The Valparaiso *Daily Vidette* reported optimistically that Klansmen at the May rally "spent a considerable portion of their time in inspecting and looking over the University," and rumormongers whispered that the Klan had acted, that Valparaiso was to become a "100 percent center," and that a breathtaking announcement was forthcoming.<sup>23</sup>

*The Dawn* continued its "Klan U." campaign after the rally, cheered by the report that "a large number" of the school's students were already Klansmen. Recalling the city's warm response to May's milling mobs of hooded Klansmen and the fine appearance of College Hill, the editor reminded his readers of the trustees' readiness to sell. *The Dawn* also explored the potential future of a Hoosier Klan university: every student, of course, would be a white Protestant and every professor a Klansman. A follow-up article slyly described a recent campus visit by a committee of "Romanists" from the University of Notre Dame and the Valparaiso Knights of Columbus. Only quick action, sound Klan ideas, and five million dollars, the editor asserted, could save the school for the Invisible Empire.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> David M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Chicago, 1965), provides a sound analysis of the Klan; Edgar A. Booth, *The Mad Mullah of America* (Columbus, Ohio, 1927), presents an insider's recollection of life at the top of the Klan hierarchy in the 1920s. Booth, a southerner who was close to both Stephenson and Imperial Wizard Hiram Evans, later despised them for their corruption of the Klan's "worthwhile" ideals; the Domain of Lake Michigan was the partial predecessor of the Realm of Indiana, which was formally chartered at Kokomo in July, 1923. John A. Davis, "The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1920-1930: An Historical Study" (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of History, Northwestern University, 1966), 67. See Davis's Chapter II, "Character and Decline," 63-117, for a history of the Klan's internal wars. Davis's treatment of the Valparaiso episode is both brief and inaccurate; Betten and Lane, "Nativism and the Klan," 8-12, also offers a brief treatment of this episode; South Bend *Tribune*, July 26, 1923; Valparaiso *Daily Vidette*, August 15, 16, 1923; quotation is from the *Daily Vidette*, August 16, 1923; Klavern Publicity Committees typically contained four to six members, appointed, like the chairman, by the Exalted Cyclops. *The Klan Management: Standard Plan For the Organization and Operation of Klans in Indiana . . . April 14, 1925* (Indianapolis, 1925), 120.

<sup>23</sup> *The Dawn*, May 9, 12, 1923; Valparaiso *Daily Vidette*, August 16, 1923; *The Dawn*, cited in Gary *Post-Tribune*, May 21, 1923; university denials issued to *Post-Tribune* reporters had little effect. *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *The Dawn*, June 2, 9, 1923; Gary *Post-Tribune*, May 21, 1923.

Despite some contradictory details, the reports of the "sale" printed in the two Valparaiso papers, the *Daily Vidette* and the *Evening Messenger*, and in the Gary *Post-Tribune* provide as reliable an account as it is possible to find of the negotiations between the Indiana Klan and Valparaiso University. Secret meetings between unidentified Klan leaders and R.D. Raymond, chairman of the Klavern's Educational Committee, and Klansman Dr. E. H. Miller produced a "favorable response" to the idea of a national Klan university. Then, nameless hooded "friends of the institution" met with university Vice-President (and ex-President) Milo Bowman in either late June or early July. They tentatively settled on a transfer price of \$340,000, with the understanding that one third would be paid immediately to alleviate the school's financial crisis and that the KKK would provide a million dollar reconstruction and endowment fund for the university.<sup>25</sup>

The Klan's apparent spokesman throughout the talks was Milton Elrod, the newly appointed editor of the *Fiery Cross*, the official newspaper of the Indiana Klan. For unknown reasons Indiana Grand Dragon Stephenson had demoted the journal's original editor in April, 1923, and had replaced him with Elrod. Every Friday, from offices in the Century Building in Indianapolis, Elrod issued twelve hate-ridden pages crammed with "news" of Klan meetings, dubious "achievements," and cluttered advertisements for "hundred percent American" businessmen. Seen through the haze of a thousand burning crosses fifty years later, Elrod seems more a misguided Babbitt than either a virulent rope-and-faggot monster or the driving force behind a Klan university.<sup>26</sup>

The newspapers reported a smooth progression of events. President Evans and Trustees Charles Jeffrey and Leonard

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<sup>25</sup> Valparaiso *Daily Vidette*, July 23, August 16, 1923; South Bend *Tribune*, August 26, 1923; Gary *Post-Tribune*, July 26, August 29, 1923; interview with John W. Van Ness; Edgar Booth recalled that Stephenson made several trips to Valparaiso, accompanied by Milton Elrod, newly appointed editor of the *Fiery Cross*, the official newspaper of the Indiana Klan. Booth, *Mad Mullah*, 70.

<sup>26</sup> The staff changes were announced in the April 27, 1923, edition of the *Fiery Cross*; Davis, "Ku Klux Klan in Indiana," 142-43; Booth states that the original editor was sacked because the *Fiery Cross* was losing too much money. The Indiana edition, however, became the model for thirty editions of the *Fiery Cross* in as many states and a bone of contention among supporters of Hiram Evans, D.C. Stephenson, and even some die-hard followers of deposed Imperial Wizard William J. Simmons. Booth, *Mad Mullah*, 228, 229, 231. The circulation of the *Fiery Cross* reached one hundred thousand in 1923, or one copy per five reported Indiana members. Norman F. Weaver, "The Knights of the Ku Klux Klan in Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio and Michigan" (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of American Civilization [History], University of Wisconsin, 1954), 151; see

Maxwell met with "D.C. Stephenson's men" during the huge Klan rally at Kokomo on July 4. Under a general agreement the Indiana klansmen agreed to deposit \$30,000 in "earnest money" in an escrow account, pending completion of the sale. Then Trustees Maxwell and Raymond and Klansman Miller traveled to Indianapolis to confer with Elrod. That worthy assured them that an unspecified Klan organization would assume responsibility for the university and its debts and provide the promised million dollars for improvements and endowment. Five hundred county Klan officials were summoned to Indianapolis to meet the three men on July 27. National Klan leaders reportedly joined the talks in early August. Then, with all sides apparently satisfied, the relieved townspeople and university officials cheerfully settled in to await the Klan's cash.<sup>27</sup>

Why did the KKK want Valparaiso University? In 1923 the newly hatched nativist movement was far more worried about radicals, aliens, and un-American ideas ("unassimilated foreigners," bolsheviks, unions, and "Romanists" were among the more dangerous) than about the Hoosier state's few blacks. *The Dawn's* editor thought Ku Klux college" would fight such radical inclinations and resist "un-Godly" universities. The hooded order, at least officially, believed that improved public education would most effectively advance "100 Percent Americanism" and not unreasonably endorsed increased state funding for education. A state or national Klan university might provide a fitting capstone to the order's educational reform program and confer an otherwise unattainable legitimacy and respectability on its dubious ideas.<sup>28</sup>

How would the Klan operate its new educational flagship? The trusting President Evans was certain that it intended no

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also D.C. Stephenson to "Gentlemen," September 27, 1923, a letter attached to the deposition of David C. Stephenson, October 15, 1928, State of Indiana in the Marion Circuit Court, of Marion County, No. 41769, State of Indiana, Plaintiff vs. The Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, et al., Defendants (copy in Archives Division, Indiana State Commission on Public Records, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis).

<sup>27</sup> Betten and Lane, "Nativism and the Klan," 10-11; Valparaiso *Evening Messenger*, July 24, August 3, 1923; possibly prompted by the Klan's lawyers or, more likely, by the penniless Elrod, a Klan committee was appointed to study the school's finances. Valparaiso *Daily Vidette*, August 15, 16, 1923; interview with John W. Van Ness; Van Ness was told that President Evans's private committee of "influential citizens" supported the sale as "the very last and extreme possible solution . . ." *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Fiery Cross*, August 24, 1923; *The Dawn*, June 2, 1923; Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, 109-11; Emma Lou Thornbrough, "Segregation in Indiana during the Klan Era of the 1920s," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLVII (March, 1961), 610-15.



Courtesy Valparaiso University Archives.

### CATHARINE CORBOY

University Secretary Corboy, A.M., served Valparaiso loyally for many years. She described campus affairs accurately to alumni and dunned them for contributions. Corboy much preferred the old days under Brown and Kinsey but stayed on through the crisis years, valiantly trying to raise a few dollars from Valparaiso's thousands of alumni. With few illusions about the true character of the KKK's sinister "philosophy," she warned Catholic and Jewish students of the Klan's probable intentions. Corboy became alumni secretary of the school in 1929.

harm and few changes for the school beyond the establishment of a chair in Bible studies, a new course in constitutional law, and an enrollment increased to five thousand. Few beyond the boundaries of Porter County, Indiana, believed this pious claptrap. Platoons of reporters were dispatched by bemused editors of state and national journals to interview local worthies and transform every half-baked rumor into paper-selling headlines. They found boundless local enthusiasm for the sale but little solid information about the Klan's intentions. Indeed, the reporters soon detected a general vagueness about the names of the actual purchasers. Neither the absence of verifiable information about "Klan U." nor the continued nonappearance of hard cash troubled the delighted city during that exciting August of 1923. From the eye of the storm Editor Elrod solemnly and frequently reiterated that "high Klan officials" were instrumental in the agreement between his order and the university. Most tried to believe that he referred to either Grand Dragon Stephenson or Imperial Wizard Hiram Evans or, ideally, both.<sup>29</sup>

The academic community was appalled by the supposed new arrangement with the KKK, and the trustees' assertion that it was "one step better than death" convinced no one. Rumors spread "insidious poison" about the campus during July and August. The school would close forever in a few days. Valparaiso's debts were settled, were not settled. Plans were afoot but had failed. More factually, Catholic students prudently withdrew from the university during the summer, and Dean Hugh Muldoon of the School of Pharmacy questioned his own return for the fall semester. University Secretary Catharine Corboy warned prospective Catholic students that "hereafter Valparaiso will not be the place for the Kellys, Burkes, and Steins." She assured a New Jersey resident that

the KKK in Indiana at present are very prominent and they are out to win. . . . they claim that the old policies of the school will prevail but since their attacks on the Jew, the Negro, the foreign-born and the Catholics are so vicious, not many will attend, but they have so many of their own people, and they certainly need an education.

The most caustic comment of the season arrived in a telegram sent to H.K. Brown by "AN ATLANTA ATTORNEY": "THIS ORDER HAS ALREADY PLACED ONE SCHOOL HERE IN

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<sup>29</sup> Valparaiso *Daily Vidette*, August 15, 1923; Arthur Ruhl, "'Old Valpo' Comes Back," *Leslie's Illustrated Weekly* (August 1, 1923), 194-95.

ATLANTA IN BANKRUPTCY. IT WILL KILL YOUR SCHOOL SURE AS HELL."<sup>30</sup>

The townspeople, on the other hand, heartily endorsed the Klan purchase of the university that had been the cornerstone of their prosperity for decades. The well-established and apparently nonthreatening local klavern had comfortably embraced many of the city's business and professional elite, and most of the citizenry evidently decided that Klan U. was better than No U. They swamped the Valparaiso *Daily Vidette* with calls for information in August, and news-seeking local businessmen crowded its offices. John M. Mavity, the *Vidette's* "reasonable" editor was apparently close to the local establishment and printed seemingly sound, detailed, and neutral accounts of the events of those critical days.<sup>31</sup>

The national press mercilessly flayed the Klan, the unfortunate university, and the booster-minded city. Most writers and editors described the KKK as a band of ignorant opportunists ravaging a fine, but troubled, university. Editors thought Campus Hill a fine spot for cross burnings. The Louisville *Courier-Journal* deplored making Valparaiso the "Grand Headquarters for the Grand Gizzard and Imperial Klowns" and "a monument to the rule of prejudice and the rule of the mob." "Klan U.," the old dream of deposed Imperial Wizard William J. Simmons, was to become a hooded Harvard, providing classes in "Mob Hall" to "Phi Beta Ku Klux Kappa men."<sup>32</sup>

The aserbic editors of *Literary Digest* sarcastically cheered the Klan's progress: no "Katalog" had yet been issued, but the "kurriculum" would include "lynching, tarring and feathering." After the purchase failed to materialize, the New York *World* rejoiced: the university "is not going into the white goods business after all." One urban editor believed the Invisible Empire fortunate not to have purchased the school since higher education "would probably lower the Klan's membership."<sup>33</sup>

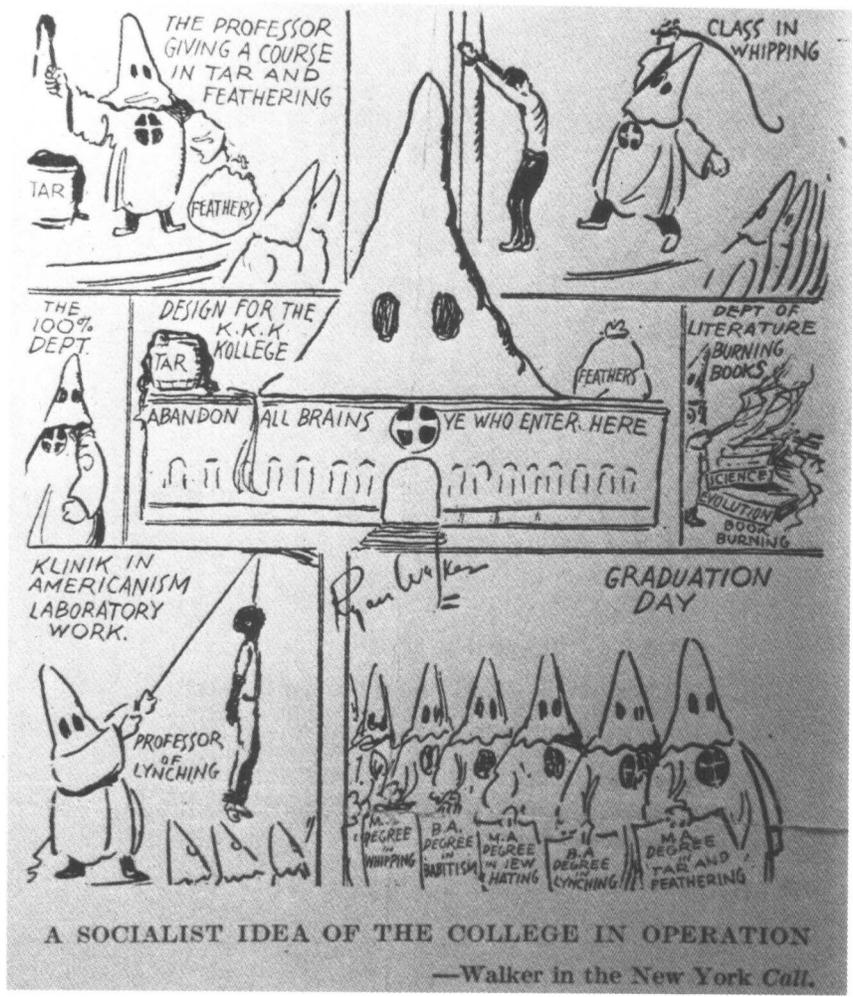
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<sup>30</sup> Valparaiso University *Torch*, July 18, 1923; Valparaiso *Daily Vidette*, August 15, 1923; South Bend *Tribune*, July 26, 1923; Catharine Corboy to Charles Tennant, West Virginia, August, 1923 (Valparaiso University Archives); Corboy to Michael Sienna, Paterson, New Jersey, August, 1923, *ibid.*; AN ATLANTA ATTORNEY to H.K. Brown, undated, Ku Klux Klan File, *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Valparaiso *Daily Vidette*, August 15, 16, September 19, 1923; Ruhl, "'Old Valpo' Comes Back," 194-95; interview with John W. Van Ness.

<sup>32</sup> Louisville *Courier-Journal*, July 24, 1923; *New Republic*, cited in Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, 168.

<sup>33</sup> *The Call*, cited in "The Klan 'Backs' a College," 43. The same article summarizes national press reactions to the Klan-university episode, 42-46; see also Chicago *Daily Tribune*, July 17, 1923; Washington *Star*, July 7, 1923; and Columbus (Ohio) *Journal*, July 18, 1923; New York *World*, February 3, 1924; New York *Evening Post*, August 6, 1923.



THIS CARTOON FROM THE NEW YORK CALL, REPRODUCED IN THE LITERARY DIGEST, LXXVIII (SEPTEMBER 15, 1923), 46, WAS TYPICAL OF THE NATIONAL NOTICE GIVEN TO THE KLAN "PURCHASE" OF VALPARAISO UNIVERSITY.



E.H. POMEROY DREW INCISIVE CARTOONS FOR THE VALPARAISO VIDETTE DURING THE NOISY KLAN-UNIVERSITY EPISODE. THE CARTOON ABOVE AND THE ONE ON THE OPPOSITE PAGE ARE COPIED FROM ORIGINALS IN THE VALPARAISO UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES.



The second attempt to capitalize on the limping school's difficulties came from an unexpected quarter. The apparently well-financed H.K. Brown had resigned his university bursarship in 1921 to resume his business career. The ex-president purchased Cook Laboratories, a Chicago manufacturer of surgical supplies, and merged it with McGregor Surgical Instrument Corporation of Needham, Massachusetts. In early July, as university officials negotiated with klansmen in Indianapolis, Brown, using an overdue payment on the school's debt as justification, terminated the university's lease on the campus and announced a vague "new educational plan." Then, as the trustees' still-private negotiations with the Klan reached the critical stage, Brown granted a seven-year lease on the campus to Cook Laboratories. His company's patent syringe, Brown insisted, would transform College Hill into a busy factory providing immediate employment for four hundred workers and for one thousand a year later. That prospect may have excited the Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce even more than Klan U.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Indianapolis *Star*, July 24, 1923; Chicago *Herald-Examiner*, July 25, 1923; Valparaiso *Evening Messenger*, July 25, 26, 1923.

The trustees resisted manfully. With thirty thousand dollars in insurance money from the burned Old College Building and donations from alumni and local citizens, they squared their account with Brown's realty concern. Then, through Attorney Grant Crumpacker, the trustees sued Brown, Valparaiso Realty Company, and Cook Laboratories in Porter County Circuit Court, seeking restoration of their lease and direct assumption of all the university's debts, specifically including the stock held by J.F. Wild.<sup>35</sup>

Brown responded with a legal demand for the removal of the university from "his" buildings and grounds and attempted to move the case to the friendlier atmosphere of the Federal District Court in Indianapolis. After those bludgeons failed, Brown proposed to share the campus. Cook Laboratories would use the substantial new science and medicine buildings, and the university could operate in the others. The ever-helpful son of the university's founder noted that students might benefit from a work-study program under that arrangement. Fortunately, the Cook Laboratories crisis eased in late July. Judge H.H. Loring denied Brown's request for a change of venue and confirmed the trustees' lease in Porter County Circuit Court in September. The trustees, in turn, dismissed their suit.<sup>36</sup>

Brown's position in the war for Valparaiso's corpse was reasonable, if opportunistic. His intrusion was fairly grounded in the university's debt to his family. Quite possibly Brown knew nothing of the Klan-university negotiations when he moved to transform the campus into a syringe factory. "If you men can continue to operate the university you have my best wishes," he informed the appalled trustees. "If you cannot operate it, however, I want to use it." Brown, however, shifted readily to a share-the-campus stance, then gradually withdrew from the contest. Nothing is known of his views on Imperial Wizard Hiram Evans, Grand Dragon Stephenson, and their ilk, but he did respect President Evans and assured Vice-President Bowman that the Brown family was "willing to do everything possible to have the [Klan] deal go through." Ultimately, Brown reaffirmed his father's principles and allowed the trustees their chance to save

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<sup>35</sup> Valparaiso *Evening Messenger*, July 26, August 9, October 18, 1923; Indianapolis *Star*, July 24, 1923.

<sup>36</sup> Valparaiso *Evening Messenger*, July 25, 26, 1923; South Bend *Tribune*, July 26, 1923; Valparaiso *Daily Vidette*, August 10, September 19, 21, 1923. Later, Brown did succeed in moving his case to the United States Circuit Court in Indianapolis, where it languished. Valparaiso *Evening Messenger*, October 18, 1923.

the university. According to sketchy records, Brown forgave most of the school's debts in 1924 or 1925.<sup>37</sup>

The Klan episode ended more bizarrely. On August 15, 1923, after weeks of official silence and ceaseless rumors, Mavity's usually sedate Valparaiso *Daily Vidette* blared "EXTRA! EXTRA! Klan to be Here Tomorrow With \$1,000,000 to take Over V.U." The word had come by telephone from Elrod and the university's representatives in Indianapolis. "Tell the boys I will be in at ten o'clock and tell them the details," chortled "Doc" Miller, "get out the good word and sound the summons . . ." Hundreds poured into the city's streets that evening for a grand celebration. They marched en masse from Klan headquarters at Monroe and Washington streets to the Pennsylvania Railroad Station at 10:00 p.m. to greet Miller and Raymond, the heroes "responsible for the deal going through." A band serenaded the "large crowd," which then escorted the guests of honor to the campus for speeches and praise.<sup>38</sup>

The tale grew even longer on August 16, as Mavity assured his readers that Elrod had made the escrow deposit, that President Evans had guaranteed that the new Valpo would retain its good old name, and that the sale would formally take place on August 28. But Editor Elrod's National University of the Ku Klux Klan had no cash, and apparently no final papers had been signed. One prominent Valparaiso citizen was told that the "Grand Dragon" [either Stephenson or Indiana Klan leader Walter Bossert] had blandly asked the Klan-university committee, after its arrival in Indianapolis: "How do you propose to raise the money?" The *Daily Vidette's* too credulous editor had been jobbed by overenthusiastic Indianapolis and Valparaiso klansmen. An agonizing two-week silence ended on September 6 with Elrod's lame announcement that, because of a "mess" of legal "technicalities," the deal was "off."<sup>39</sup>

September brought cool weather and hot, face-saving recriminations. Trustee Charles Jeffrey insisted that excessive publicity—on which the Klan usually doted—had scuttled the transaction. Elmer D. Brothers, president of the Board of Trustees, concluded afterward that the entire episode had been a "dream" of "idealistic editor" Elrod and other penniless publi-

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<sup>37</sup> Valparaiso *Evening Messenger*, August 24, September 6, 1923; Gary *Post-Tribune*, September 14, 1972.

<sup>38</sup> Valparaiso *Daily Vidette*, August 15, 16, 1923.

<sup>39</sup> Valparaiso *Daily Vidette*, August 16, 1923; Valparaiso *Evening Messenger*, August 28, 30, September 6, 1923; *Fiery Cross*, August 31, 1923; interview with John W. Van Ness.

cists. Perhaps the wave of national ridicule had given "Grand Gizzard" Evans and Stephenson cause to reconsider, but Judge Robert I. Marsh, the Indiana Klan's attorney, readily admitted that his organization had no money either to buy or to operate Valparaiso University. The episode closed with a whimper. Helen Kull of the university library concluded that the Klan had persevered in the face of mountains of adverse publicity but argued that "the plan which took on such vast proportions in the minds of the members of the organization, was never more than [an] extravagant day-dream."<sup>40</sup>

Power relationships within the Klan during the much-reported Klan-university talks remain obscure. Few records of the Invisible Empire have survived, if indeed any existed in the first place. Was Editor Elrod only an enthusiast, hypnotized by a grand dream in white? Perhaps he was an honest broker, torpedoed at the last moment by his principals. Did he ever have a solid cash commitment from either Imperial Wizard Evans or Grand Dragon Stephenson, two men who openly detested one another? Every question about this aspect of the incident seems to prompt two others.

Elrod's public role in the negotiations can be traced through the pages of his *Fiery Cross*, which first mentioned the university in the issue of May 11, 1923. Elrod then reported that "the 300 students of the Valparaiso University are planning a welcome" for the Klan rally in Valparaiso and would "produce a thrill of their own." His recapitulation of the events of the rally ignored the school, however, and his chief effusion in the next issue was a mangled pseudobiblical account of "Samson and Delilah." By early June the editor of the *Fiery Cross* had apparently forgotten Valparaiso in his breathless anticipation of the approaching Kokomo rally in July.<sup>41</sup>

Elrod broke the purchase story on August 24 under the headline "KLAN TO PERPETUATE VALPO." Puffery reigned supreme: the old college was "to Become a Monument to American Ideals and Principles—Maze of Legal Technicalities Are Now Being Ironed Out." Klansmen in "several states" had endorsed the arrangement that Elrod seemed to be orchestrating. Supported by \$1,350,000 in Klan cash, Valparaiso would "furnish a national institute of the highest type," endorsed by "the full force

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<sup>40</sup> Valparaiso *Evening Messenger*, September 6, 8, 1923; *Gary Post-Tribune*, September 8, 1923; Helen Kull to Miss Eliza Lansdale, Philadelphia, November 1, 1923 (Valparaiso University Archives); Booth thought the Klan liked the publicity. Booth, *Mad Mullah*, 71.

<sup>41</sup> *Fiery Cross*, May 25, July 6, 13, 20, 27, 1923.

of the National Organization of the Klan . . .” Old employees, said Elrod magnanimously, would be retained. An old mill on the campus, “rich in historical lore,” would be restored, and the shores of nearby Sager Lake would be dotted with cottages for visiting parents. A “wonderful bathing beach” and “golf links” would complete this academic resort. Bit in his teeth, Elrod warned “un-American and alien forces” against disrupting the talks, for “whatever the Ku Klux Klan starts out to do, it always does.” With “remarkable enthusiasm” from “all parts of America,” reported the *Fiery Cross* on August 24, the Klan must prevail.<sup>42</sup>

Doubt crept in less than a week later. The August 31 issue of the *Fiery Cross* admitted that details would take time but asserted that Klan lawyers had the matter in hand. Fortunately, Valpo’s football schedule would proceed without interruption. By September 7 Elrod was describing the “Indiana Klansmen” of the university’s new Board of Trustees, while conceding that prospects for the purchase—because of the charter—had become “gloomy.” By October all mention of the university had disappeared from the pages of the *Fiery Cross*.<sup>43</sup>

How credible was Elrod’s charge that the sale was blocked by “a tangled snarled mass of details and counterdeals, and legal technicalities . . .”? Despite his insistence to the contrary, the charter was no problem. Vice-President Bowman, in fact, insisted that the trustees would willingly and immediately make whatever adjustments the Klan desired. The Valparaiso Realty Company’s mortgage on the campus was at the service of either cash or good credit. Cook Laboratories’ lease and a rather meaningless mortgage held since 1921 by J.F. Wild to secure a failed bond issue remained technically viable in the Porter County Recorder’s Office until both were quietly cancelled in 1924. The school’s obligations, with H.K. Brown’s willing approval, were at that time combined into a single note.<sup>44</sup>

Grand Dragon Stephenson may have been embarrassed by his editor’s shenanigans. As the Klan-university talks soured in

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, August 24, 1923; Booth corroborated the “suburban real estate plan,” so typical of 1920s-style boosters, in his *Mad Mullah*, 71.

<sup>43</sup> *Fiery Cross*, September 7, 14, 21, 28, 1923; Elrod, with Evans’s support, moved to Washington, D.C., later in 1923 to help found the national Klan’s Bureau of Education and Publication. Booth, *Mad Mullah*, 228.

<sup>44</sup> *Fiery Cross*, August 31, 1923; creditors, essentially the Brown family, apparently forgave \$100,000 of the university’s debt in 1924. Gary *Post-Tribune*, September 8, 1923; Valparaiso *Evening Messenger*, July 26, 1923; Valparaiso *Daily Vidette*, July 10, 1923; Booth asserted that Stephenson, Elrod, and the Klan’s legal advisors orchestrated the “legal technicalities” argument after Imperial Wizard Evans failed to provide funds. Booth, *Mad Mullah*, 71.

September, Stephenson muzzled Elrod. All KKK news of the Realm of Indiana was thereafter to be "first submitted" to either Indiana Klan leader Walter Bossert or George V. Coffin, a Marion County Klan leader. Harry Bloom became business manager of the newspaper with orders to report directly to Bossert. The booster-editor was thus thoroughly grounded, perhaps a victim of his own egotistical excesses and the Klan's proclivity for secrecy.<sup>45</sup>

What part did Stephenson and the Realm of Indiana play in the almost certainly vaporous university purchase talks? Did the Grand Dragon at any point promise *anything* to Elrod, or did he merely allow his editor to travel as far as his jawbone could carry him? Stephenson later testified that the national Klan had raised over eighty million dollars while he held office. Of that sum, \$4.5 million was collected in Indiana, from which \$2.5 million flowed into Imperial Wizard Hiram Evans's Atlanta coffers. Yet in March, 1923, the only date for which figures exist, only fifty thousand dollars rested in the state Klan's bank account. No national Klan money ever arrived in the Hoosier state for "charitable" or any other worthwhile purposes during the 1920s. Where did it all go? Stephenson squandered his personal share, admittedly a million dollars, on liquor, parties, women, fast automobiles, and his ninety-eight-foot twin screw mahogany and teak yacht, *Reomas II*. Such high patriotic duties clearly precluded wasting cash on colleges.<sup>46</sup>

Did Stephenson permit Elrod's expansive boasts merely to prod Imperial Wizard Evans into providing the money, or was Elrod only a stalking horse to embarrass a dangerous rival? Stephenson raged over the "yellow livered" southern Klan that had raised a hundred thousand dollars for an Atlanta monument "to the memory of the rebels who once tried to destroy America" but "refused to give a single dollar for Valparaiso University to help educate the Patriots of the North who saved the Union . . ." Soon after Hiram Evans anointed him as Grand Dragon at Kokomo in July, 1923, Stephenson was officially ousted by his former

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<sup>45</sup> D.C. Stephenson to "Gentlemen," September 27, 1923, copy attached to Deposition of David C. Stephenson, October 15, 1928. Although Stephenson himself was "purged" in September, 1923, by the Evans-Bossert group, he was able to manage Elrod, if only temporarily, through Bloom, who was purportedly sent to "get" Elrod for "standing extremely close to Dr. [Hiram] Evans." Bloom hated Elrod but made the leap to the Evans forces with him. Booth, *Mad Mullah*, 228, 230.

<sup>46</sup> Deposition of D.C. Stephenson, October 15, 1928, pp. 15, 16, 20-22, 40; Davis, "Ku Klux Klan," 69; Booth, *Mad Mullah*, 135. Booth claimed the entire plan was Stephenson's from the outset. *Ibid.*, 70.



Courtesy Indianapolis *Star-News*.

DAVID CURTIS STEPHENSON  
(1891-1966)

Stephenson, Grand Dragon of the Indiana Ku Klux Klan for a few moments in his tempestuous life, was born in Texas. An elementary school dropout, he was a printer in Oklahoma and an officer in World War I; he surfaced in 1921 in Evansville, Indiana, as a coal salesman. He tried to win political office twice, first as a Wet Democrat, then as a Dry Republican, without success. As a Klansman, he gave stirring speeches against Catholics, blacks, Jews, and foreigners. He sold fear wholesale and by 1923 was the head of the Hoosier Klan, owned a yacht and an airplane emblazoned with three flaming K's, and was a busy womanizer. Stephenson's troubles began almost immediately after his appointment as Indiana Grand Dragon, and he was soon removed from the dragonship by the jealous Imperial Wizard. By 1925 he was finished; a state prison would be his home until 1956 except for a short period in 1950 (a parole violation returned him to his familiar cell). After a life that included four marriages and many legal scrapes in addition to his life sentence for murder and rape, he died in Jonesboro, Tennessee.

benefactor and a coalition of Bossert-led Hoosier "loyalists." Were these greedy, unpredictable enemies even remotely likely to support a Klan college? Evans, still "spending Hoosier money like Nero drunk," according to Stephenson, was already soured on educational ventures by the failure of the Klan's Lanier University in friendly Atlanta. What hope was there for southern money at a distant Yankee college in Stephenson's domain?<sup>47</sup>

Ultimately, greed and corruption, rather than a genuine lack of money, halted the Klan purchase of Valparaiso University. The Realm of Indiana, the personal tool of "I am the law" Stephenson, and Hiram Evans's Invisible Empire seemed powerful and united in 1923. Both organizations were, in fact, ramshackle collections of cooperating and competing fiefdoms of men more interested in liberating their supporters from excess funds by selling memberships and regalia than in either running a college or in "preserving white civilization." They were, in the words of historian David M. Chalmers, "exploitative" and "out for money." Greedy, short-sighted, and stupid men like Stephenson and Evans wrecked the Klan, fortunately, in their "fight over the spoils."<sup>48</sup>

In retrospect, Indiana Grand Dragon Stephenson probably had little to do with the Valparaiso business. "The Old Man," as he was called, was much more concerned with personal vices and the pursuit of money. A pipe dream of the middle-class, civic-minded Valparaiso Klavern, the university purchase was first publicized by *The Dawn* of the Realm of Illinois and popularized at the Valparaiso rally of the Klan's Domain of Lake Michigan in May, 1923. Editor Milton Elrod of the Realm of Indiana's *Fiery Cross* annexed the idea and projected himself as the not unworthy healer of internal Klan rivalries and founder of a great university. In his earnest and fertile mind cash for the scheme would bountifully flow from Stephenson, Hiram Evans, and a million loyal klansmen. Not a cent was ever produced, and in the absence of documents to the contrary, the "purchase" of Valparaiso University by the Ku Klux Klan must be regarded essentially as a bizarre event in the florid history of boosterism in the 1920s.

Horace Evans continued his struggle to save Valparaiso after the Klan episode. Millions of Americans were certain that his university had fallen under the white robe, but approximately

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<sup>47</sup> *The Old Man's Answer to the Hate Venders*, a flyer printed during the 1924 election campaign and attached to Deposition of D. C. Stephenson, October 15, 1928; Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, 169; Booth thought that Stephenson had "no idea of buying the college with his own money." Booth, *Mad Mullah*, 71.

<sup>48</sup> Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, 4.

830 certificate, high school, and college students trickled in for the fall session of 1923, a decline of only one third from the 1922-1923 school year. For that the chastened but determined Welshman was grateful. In October Horace Evans and a body of "representative businessmen" offered fifteen campus acres near the gymnasium to Cook Laboratories for a factory site in exchange for the Brown family's cancellation of the school's debts. Brown rejected the proposition, but loyal townspeople gave eight thousand dollars to a last ditch fund for the floundering school. In 1924 Valparaiso launched a "WE WANT \$1,000,000" bailout and endowment drive. A well-written and widely distributed brochure, *Seven Questions About Valparaiso University*, completely failed to move alumni and other potential donors, and the school's debts remained intractable. Accreditation was unattainable, and "Old Valpo" remained out of step with an age of "frats," clubs, flappers, and liberal arts.<sup>49</sup>

The ever-determined Evans and his associates next led a nearly successful second attempt to interest the state in their school. With a proposed Porter County bond issue for \$250,000 to redeem the school's debts as a sweetener, a bill to make Valparaiso a state teachers' college cleared the legislature early in 1925. Despite an aggressive letter-writing campaign directed by the Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce, Klan-endorsed Governor Ed Jackson pocket vetoed the measure. That seemed the last straw for a sinking school that had been offered, without success, to the state (twice), to the businessmen of Gary (in 1920), the Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elk, the Loyal Order of the Moose, a consortium of Valparaiso businessmen, the Presbyterian church, the Ku Klux Klan, and (partially) to H.K. Brown's Cook Laboratories.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Valparaiso *Evening Messenger*, October 15, 18, 19, 1923; the Valparaiso *Daily Vidette*, September 19, 1923, stated that the trustees had declined Brown's first joint occupation proposal. *Seven Questions About Valparaiso University*, an undated, unpaginated brochure, was circulated in 1924. A copy is in the Valparaiso University Archives. See also Lewis Demarcus Sampson, *The Situation Confronting Valparaiso University* (Valparaiso, 1924); trustees' form letter [1924] for "One Million Dollars Endowment Fund Campaign" (Valparaiso University Archives). The administration contemplated establishing a junior college in 1924. *Seven Questions About Valparaiso University*.

<sup>50</sup> W. C. Sutter, secretary-manager, Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce, to "Mr. Representative," March 4, 1925 (Valparaiso University Archives); Strietelmeier, *Centennial History*, 74; Moore, *Calumet Region*, 470n; Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce to "Indiana Alumni of Valparaiso University," February 10, 1925 (Valparaiso University Archives); Albers, *Centennial*, 6; Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce, *Valparaiso*, I (October, 1921), 3-4; Valparaiso *Evening Messenger*, October 19, 1923; E. J. Freund, president, Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce, to the Indiana Alumni of Valparaiso University, February 10, 1925 (Valparaiso University Archives); undated clipping from the 1920 Valparaiso *Daily Vidette*, 1920 File (Valparaiso University Archives).

Lutheran churchmen rescued Valparaiso in 1925. The Reverend George F. Schutes, pastor of Valparaiso's Immanuel Lutheran Church, proposed that the Central District of the Missouri Synod, with which his church was affiliated, develop the school as a Lutheran university. Schutes enlisted the support of the Reverend John C. Baur, a prominent Fort Wayne church spokesman, fund-raiser, and antiklansman. With willing endorsements from the National Lutheran Education Association and the always helpful Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce, Baur advanced the plan to a number of Lutheran groups.<sup>51</sup>

Schutes's and Baur's activities led to the incorporation of the Lutheran University Association of Fort Wayne, which in turn formed the Valparaiso University Association to raise funds and operate the school. The Chamber of Commerce somehow induced H.K. Brown to cancel most of the school's debts to his family, and the trustees forgave about \$100,000 owed to them for cash loans and supplies. Valparaiso University was deeded over to the Lutherans for \$176,000. Active Lutherans supported the project generously, and a loan from a Fort Wayne insurance company completed the funding.<sup>52</sup>

When the sale was announced on August 11, 1925, two years after the sorry Klan episode, Valparaiso's church bells were rung, and a public celebration lasted until a rainstorm drove everyone indoors at 2:00 a.m. The party was warranted this time. The new Lutheran Association brought sound management, reduced debts, and years of quiet progress to the worthy old school.<sup>53</sup>

The Lutherans had acquired a sadly run-down place. The charred bones of the Old College Building still mouldered among shabby structures, but "scrubbing and cosmetic work" in the fall of 1925 made the campus at least presentable. Professors, who some members of the Missouri Synod feared "could undo in half an hour what had taken years to build up" were doubtlessly carefully watched, but all went well. The student body, though still small, was half Lutheran five years later. By then fully accredited departments in the arts and sciences shared a true university with professional schools of engineering, law, and pharmacy.<sup>54</sup>

Valparaiso threaded its way through the depression despite falling enrollment and local bank failures that carried dearly won funds away. The great days that Horace Evans had strug-

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<sup>51</sup> Albers, *Centennial*, 6; Streitmeier, *Centennial History*, 72, 82-83.

<sup>52</sup> Streitmeier, *Centennial History*, 85-86; Moore, *Calumet Region*, 470-76.

<sup>53</sup> Streitmeier, *Centennial History*, 87.

<sup>54</sup> Albers, *Centennial*, 6; Streitmeier, *Centennial History*, 78.

gled so hard, if not always so wisely, to achieve returned to College Hill under President Otto P. Kretzmann. Four new colleges were founded during his twenty-eight-year tenure, and an exceptional physical plant emerged to serve a growing student body. In 1959 Old Valpo, a thriving university with a national reputation for excellence, celebrated its centennial with the dedication of the architecturally remarkable Chapel of the Resurrection and the singing of a *Te Deum*. Fortunately, D.C. Stephenson's long-defunct Ku Klux Klan was unable to attend.<sup>55</sup>

The abortive KKK "purchase" of Valparaiso University, an important story in itself, raises many significant questions about the Indiana Klan in general. For example, could the hyperbole, disunity, and personal rivalries that characterized the conduct of the Valparaiso University episode be typical of the Klan's management of its everyday internal affairs? Were those carefully managed Klan rallies and parades, those grand images of unity and patriotism, created only to attract membership fees? Did they mask, if not hood, an opportunistic, venal, and incompetent organization? The frictions among Imperial Wizard Evans, Grand Dragon Stephenson, Editor Elrod, and the rank and file may be a more accurate indicator of Klan reality. The Valparaiso klansmen who coordinated their city's attempt to save its leading "business" were solid, bourgeois doctors and lawyers, businessmen and boosters. Were they, rather than uncouth "good ol' boys," more typical klansmen? If so, historians need to reexamine some widely held assumptions.

Living ex-Klan members are understandably closemouthed; rueful kleagles, klaliffs, and kludds sent most Klan documents up a hundred chimneys after the 1920s. It is thus difficult for the historian to appraise the impact of the Klan on society at large. How important, really, were Klan endorsements of Republican candidates for state and local offices in a Republican era? Did local klaverns maintain stable memberships, or did klansmen come and go? Who joined in which community, and why? Were many, as the well-polished shoes beneath their white gowns often suggested, middle-class men and women? What percentage were workers? How many were farmers? Were they racists, nativists, haters—simple bigots in a racist age—or honestly concerned citizens, joiners in an age of joiners of an organization that promised to solve apparent problems? Even if more klavern rosters are discovered, such questions may remain unanswer-

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<sup>55</sup> Otto C. Kreinheder to "Friend," January 20, 1931 (Valparaiso University Archives); Kreinheder to Harry Eberline, Detroit, January 13, 1932, *ibid.*

ble, but they must be asked. Researchers should also reexamine the Klan's surprisingly modernist platform for public education, and they should study the Klan's impact on the General Assemblies and governors of the 1920s.

Clearly the leaders of the Indiana Klan in the 1920s cannot be lumped with the membership at large. If the conduct of Elrod, Stephenson, Simmons, and their kind during the Valparaiso University episode is any indicator, they may well have been all talk and little more.